

## Bob Santos

by Gary Iwamoto

He's everybody's Uncle Bob--progressive, advocate, advisor, mentor, confidante, employment reference and drinking buddy for our community. Throughout his career, Bob Santos has been a catalyst for change--as a civil rights activist, a community developer, and an advocate for affordable housing.

His father was Sammy Santos, a well respected boxer in the Filipino American community. Everyone in the Filipino community knew his father by name. The press called him "Sockin' Sammy Santos." Sammy fought many fights throughout the country before ending up in Seattle. Sammy never made it to the top but came close, one fight away from a championship bout. Little Bobby looked up to his father. He memorized each page of his father's worn out boxing scrapbook and knew every boxer Sammy had knocked out and in what round. But the fight game took its toll on Sammy. His eyesight grew increasingly worse, ultimately becoming blind. Little Bobby had to become his father's eyes. Sammy lived in Room 306, right across from the elevator, in the N.P. Hotel in the heart of what was then known only as Chinatown. Each Saturday, little Bobby took his father by the arm to visit his father's favorite hangouts in Chinatown.

During the weekdays, Bob lived with his Aunt Toni and Uncle Joe in the Central Area. The Central Area neighborhood where Bob grew up was the most ethnically diverse neighborhood in the city. Bob made life long friendships with the children of Japanese, Filipino, and African American families who lived there. The neighborhood gang included kids from the Maryknoll Church, Immaculate, where Bob went, Garfield, Franklin, and O'Dea High Schools. To this day, the kids who grew up on 16th Avenue hold annual reunions to relive the old times. In the summers, Bob worked in the Alaska canneries, getting first hand experience in discovering unequal treatment between white and colored.

Like his dad, Bob wanted to be a boxer. He joined the Marines out of high school to fight, literally. Bob was on the Marine boxing team. He had a few bouts and did okay but getting punched in the face wasn't his idea of fun. He wanted to fight in the Korean war but the armistice was called before he got there. Still Bob's desire to fight the good fight would serve him later in other arenas.

After discharge from the Marines in 1955, Bob found work at Boeing. He got married and started raising a family--sons Dan, Tom, and John and daughters Simone, Robin, and Nancy. But working in the private sector didn't appeal to Bob. He wanted to channel his energies into doing something positive. He volunteered to coach a physical fitness program for youth through the Knights of Columbus. He became active with the Catholic Interracial Council. And when the 1960's came, Bob was on the front lines of the battle for civil rights. He went to his first march, carrying the banner of the Catholic Interracial Council in support of open housing.. He served on the Seattle Human Rights Commission and began to forge harmonious working relationships outside of the Asian community. As Director of Project Caritas, Bob fought to provide positive opportunities for inner city youth.

Bob's role in revitalizing the International District is well documented. As a kid growing up in Chinatown among the prostitutes, manongs, and transients, who like the buildings, were often neglected and abandoned, Bob developed a love and appreciation for this neighborhood. The construction of Interstate 5 in the 1960's physically divided the area and eliminated businesses, homes, and churches. Families left Chinatown, moving into Beacon Hill and Rainier Valley. Closer to the commercial core, buildings were abandoned, some torn down for parking lots. The 1970's brought stricter building and fire codes resulting

in the closure and demolition of many buildings. Over half of the 45 hotels and apartments were closed. Businesses failed and buildings deteriorated. The construction of the Kingdome, beginning in 1972, generated traffic and parking problems. When Bob became the director of the International District Improvement Association or Inter\*im in 1972, the District had been in a steep decline.

Operating out of a small storefront on the corner of Maynard and Jackson in the old Bush Hotel, Inter\*im, under Bob's leadership, became a magnet for young Asian activists, many of whom were recent college graduates or emerging professionals with fresh and innovative ideas toward serving the community. Plans were developed and proposals were written to fund demonstration projects which would later become the International District Community Health Center, the Asian Counseling and Referral Service, the Denise Louie Education Center, and the International District Housing Alliance. Under Bob, Inter\*im sponsored a meal voucher program, a legal referral service/clinic, and a nutrition program.

One of Bob's proudest accomplishments as the Director of Inter\*im was the development of the Danny Woo International District Community Garden. The hillside between Washington and Main Street was overgrown with weeds and sticker bushes. Bob rallied a massive community effort to make the garden a reality. He negotiated lease agreements with the City of Seattle and the Woo Family. He coaxed and cajoled the use of bulldozers and heavy machinery to remove the underbrush, persuaded the local horse race track to dump tons of horse manure to fertilize the land, and organized community work parties, bringing in not only the young Asian activists but work crews from El Centro de la Raza and the United Indians for All Tribes. Bob instituted the annual community pig roast in the garden which continues today.

As Director of Inter\*im, Bob was instrumental in the formation of the public corporation, today known as the Seattle Chinatown International District Preservation and Development Authority in which he also served first as a board member and later as executive director. He was instrumental in finding Federal housing grants, low interest loans, and partnership development agreements which supported the rehabilitation of older apartments and hotels such as the Bush Hotel, the New Central Apartments, and the Jackson Apartments. Bob also laid the groundwork for the International District Village Square by having the foresight in the late 1970s to acquire the site, an abandoned bus maintenance and storage facility, from Metro.

Bob developed a reputation for being a community spokesman, never hesitating to speak for those who couldn't-- whether it be at government hearings, public forums, or for the media. Whatever the cause, Bob was there. When Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes were murdered, Bob didn't hesitate to join the Committee for Justice for Domingo and Viernes.

With years of community service, Bob felt his experience was a natural fit for politics. As a political candidate, he campaigned for a seat in the 37th District in the State Legislature as a Republican, and when that didn't work, he campaigned for the same seat as a Democrat. That didn't work either. So he tried for a different political office, a seat on the King County Council. They say that the third time's the charm. But not for Bob. He fought the good fight...which means he lost again. It was obvious that the political establishment was not ready for Bob. Incidentally or ironically, the legislative seat which Bob had ran for is now held by one Sharon Tomiko Santos, who won, some say, in spite of her husband..

But even though he lost political elections, Bob wanted to serve the people. When someone had problems dealing with the law or government bureaucracy, Uncle Bob was there to help. If he couldn't find a way to solve the problem, he'd be on the phone finding someone who could. As a community leader and later as

an aide to Congressman Mike Lowry, Bob's made a career of dealing with complaints by constituents.

In 1994, Bob was asked to serve as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Regional Director (Region X), a position he held for seven years in the Clinton Administration. During that tenure he established many new HUD-sponsored housing programs in urban, rural, and tribal areas. As an advocate for the homeless, he was the first director to open up the Federal Building as an emergency shelter.

After the Bush Administration took office in 2001, Bob was again was tapped to serve as the Executive Director of the Inter\*im. In his second stint as Director of Inter\*im, Bob guided the development of the Nihonmachi Terrace Project, a five story complex of 50 units (1-4 bedroom units serving 30-50% median income), a playground, accessory parking, and commercial office space. .

Bob has had a tremendous impact on the lives of individuals. He is often cited as an employment reference for prospective job seekers, sometimes for applicants seeking the same job. His personal charm and easy going manner attracted young people to work for him. Bob served as mentor to many of these activists who, today, have risen to positions of responsibility in government and private industry. Others have brought their expertise back to the community through working in the ID or serving on the boards of directors for the social service agencies in the District

If we were graded on what we do in life, Bob's report card would read, "works well with others." His relationships with other minority community leaders, particularly Bernie Whitebear, Executive Director of the United Indians for All Tribes; Roberto Maestas, Executive Director of El Centro de la Raza; and King County Councilman Larry Gossett, former Executive Director of the Central Area Motivation Program , were not only political alliances but the strongest of friendships. The "Gang of Four" brought their communities together and developed a united stand on such diverse issues as fishing rights, immigrants' rights, welfare reform, and funding for social services. Serving a little ham on rice, the "Gang of Four" performed skits and musical numbers and were the most popular amateur act at Northwest Asian American Theatre's Annual Community Showoff.

Bob's most endearing trait is that he makes community service fun. Hanging out with Uncle Bob, enjoying the pleasure of his company, learning how to do the hustle and the electric slide, sharing a drink or two or three at King Yen, Gooey's, Quong Tuck., Four Seas, and Bush Garden, we all have our Uncle Bob stories. His reputation as the "King of Karaoke" and "Party Animal" is legendary. When you go looking for Uncle Bob, he's not hard to find--he's the center of attention at the table where everyone is carrying on. Bob is dedicated without being dogmatic, an idealist with flexibility, hobnobbing with the political establishment without forgetting the little guy or gal.

Today, Bob continues to work tirelessly taking evenings and weekends to do tours of the ID, is a popular speaker to students from elementary to graduate-level classrooms, serves as honorary chairperson for capital campaigns, and is the most sought-after emcee for community banquets and events in the Asian Pacific community. He is frequently called upon to provide public testimony at government hearings on impacts which potential projects would have on the ID. He is admired for his charismatic leadership, down-to-earth humor and 'unassuming' demeanor coming from his working class roots. His enduring charm and leadership draws volunteers of all backgrounds and especially young people to the ID to continue the rich legacy of activism and volunteers. Bob would be the first to tell you that he had a lot of help. There may be others who should share the credit but there's only one Uncle Bob.

